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SIPDIS

DEPARTMENT FOR SCA/INSB

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SUBJECT: FONSEKA ARREST PROMPTS BUDDHIST CLERGY CONCERNS FOR
DEMOCRACY

¶1. (SBU) SUMMARY: The Fonseka arrest has led to a rift between the Rajapaksa leadership and the four mahanayakas (chief monks) of the largest Buddhist sects. The arrest sparked the monks to raise broader issues of democratic governance and to call a Sangha Sabha (council of clergy) to discuss the situation. But the council was indefinitely postponed after the monks received bomb threats. Government apologists retaliated by promising that 500 temples would be split off from the main Buddhist sect and re-aligned with a lesser-known sect from the Rajapaksas' home region in the south.
END SUMMARY.

MONKS' STATEMENT CALLS ARREST UNJUSTIFIED

¶2. (SBU) On February 14, Mahanayake of Asgiriya Rev. Udugama Sri Buddharakkitha, Mahanayake of Malwatte Rev. Thibbotuwawe Sri Sumangala, Mahanayake of Ramanna Nikaya Rev. Weveldeniyee Medhalankara, and Mahanayaka of Amarapura Nikaya Rev Divuldena Gnanissara in a joint statement said the arrest of Fonseka was unjustified and unacceptable. Therough way the arrest of Fonseka was conducted prompted the mahanayake of Asgiriya (Temple of the Tooth) chapter to say "he (Fonseka) has done much for the country, and the way it was done cannot be approved." The mahanayaka of the Malawatte Chapter went further to criticize attacks on journalists and the current state of democracy in the country.

¶3. (SBU) These statements were followed by a call for a Sangha Sabha (council of clergy) by monks of all four sects at Kandy on February 18, which was to have assembled hundreds of monks from temples across the island. (NOTE: In the recorded history of over two thousand years of Buddhism in Sri Lanka, there have been very few such councils of monks. A Sangha Sabha was summoned only when the king exceeded his limits, and the monks felt duty-bound to ask for good governance. END NOTE.)

THREATS FORCE CANCELLATION OF MONKS' COUNCIL

¶4. (SBU) Statements by the monks criticizing the Fonseka arrest and warning that democracy on the island was at risk reportedly enraged the Rajapaksas. Two days before the Sangha Sabha was to open, Buddhist contacts from the provinces informed us that temples had been told that bombs would be hurled at buses transporting monks to

the council. On February 16, the mahanayake of Malwatte announced the assembly had been indefinitely postponed due to security concerns. General Secretary of the main opposition UNP Tissa Attanayake claimed government ministers were directly involved in threatening the mahanayakas to stop the Sangha Sabha.

RAJAPKSAS SEEK OWN BUDDHIST SECT

15. (SBU) Government apologists then made it known that the government would retaliate against the Malwatte chapter (its mahanayaka led the call for convening the Sangha Sabha) by removing 500 southern province temples (of the central province-based Malwatte chapter) and re-aligning these temples with the lesser-known Rohana sect of the south (the political home turf of the Rajapaksas). They also discussed the creation of another major Buddhist sect with its loyalties to the Rajapaksas.

BACKGROUND ON BUDDHIST SECTS

16. (SBU) The Siyam Nikaya (high-ordination clergy of the Asgiriya and Malwatte chapters) has been the guardian of orthodox Buddhism for over a thousand years. The Asgiriya chapter is the older and holds the Kandy tooth relic of the Buddha, which was regarded as the symbol of sovereignty of Sri Lankan rulers. The Malwatte chapter is the largest Buddhist sect in Sri Lanka. Both the Asgiriya and Malwatte chapters permit higher ordination only to those of the Govigama caste (to which the Rajapaksas belong). The Amarapura and Ramanna Nikayas were founded in the late eighteen century to open

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higher ordination to those of the non-Govigama caste (to which Fonseka belongs). These two nikayas were founded on the initiative of Colonel Henry Steele Olcott of the United States, a theosophist who led a Buddhist revival in colonial Ceylon.

COMMENT

17. (SBU) Contacts have told us that the monks' rebellion against the Rajapaksas was unprecedented insofar as the monks disregarded their traditional caste differences to come together against what they saw as abuses by the Rajapaksas. The significance of this step can hardly be over-estimated. President Rajapaksa has often made highly publicized visits to temples and has relied on the support of the mainstream Buddhist clergy. That the clergy now has so publicly registered its dissatisfaction with the country's governance is an indication of the deep rifts within the Sinhala majority community. Religious-freedom experts told us that the Buddhist clergy was perhaps closer to the pulse of the rural masses than anyone. "They summoned a Sangha Sabha with the full knowledge of the hurt feelings of the Sinhalese. They have only postponed the Sangha Sabha."

BUTENIS